

UPCOMING
DISCUSSIONS

Bring a
Lunch

Blue as the Lake

Discussion Date: 3-20-10

English Creek

Discussion Date: 4-10-10

Bel Canto

Discussion Date: 5-1-10

Sail Ho!

Adult Summer Reading Club

May 24 – July 24



Discussion Questions courtesy of
<http://us.macmillan.com>

Discussion Guide designed by
Sandy Smith, Lodi Public Library

Books courtesy of
the Book Club in Box program
sponsored by the 49-99 Library System



Out Stealing Horses

Discussion Date: 8-14-10

March

Discussion Date: 10-16-10

Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie
Society

Discussion Date: 11-6-10

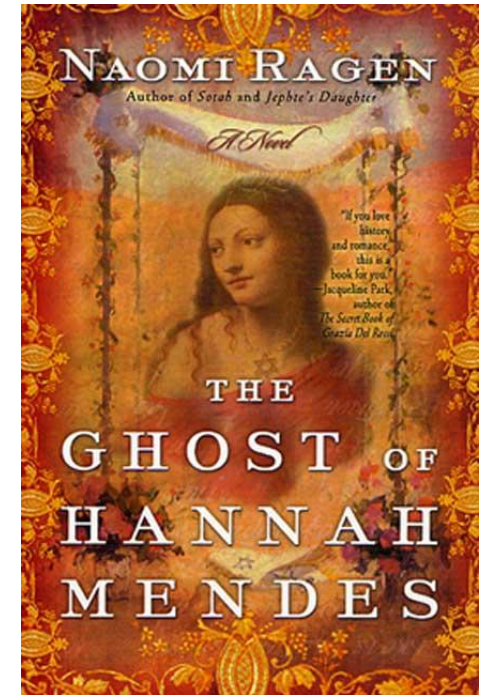
Galileo's Daughter

Discussion Date: 11-27-10

**Brown Bag
Book Club**



Digs in & Discusses



Saturday, Feb. 27, 2010

Noon – 2pm

Activity Room

Lodi Public Library

201 W. Locust St.

Call 333-5503 for more information

Discussion Questions

1. *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes* is really two books: a contemporary novel about the lives of two modern career girls, and a historical novel. Why did the author choose to weave this material together into one book? What do you think it accomplishes? Had she chosen to write the story of Gracia Mendes as straight historical fiction, how would the focus have changed?

2. Catherine da Costa sends her granddaughters off in search of their heritage, their roots, and their history. What do you think the lives of our ancestors have to teach us now, hundreds of years later? Or are we better off not burdening our children with the past, allowing them to discard it like so much excess baggage?

3. Describe Suzanne and Francesca. How are they different? In what ways are they similar? In what ways do each respond to the legacy of their heritage?

4. In one scene in the book, Francesca is fired from her job. What effect does this event have on her life in terms of her actions, her character and her worldview?

5. The author has often said that it is possible to explain all the events in this book without believing in the supernatural. What events are there that are attributed to the ghost? Can you find another way of explaining them?

6. In many cultures, the matchmaker is a respected professional that serves an important role. Yet, when Suzanne discovers that her meeting with Gabriel was prearranged by her grandmother, she turns her back and walks out. Is she justified in being angry?

7. Intermarriage between people of different religions and cultures has become an accepted, routine phenomenon in the modern world. Yet, the book seems to imply that Suzanne's relationship with Renaldo was doomed for exactly those reasons. Do you agree with this implication? Why?

8. "All of mankind is one, each contributing a unique and matchless truth," Catherine writes in her will. This is an idea of unique importance in this book. Explain this idea and its relevance to the material describing the Spanish Inquisition.

9. One of the main themes in this book is the idea of a family wrenched from its past; all those things their ancestors lived and died for, are now barely remembered. Would you call that progress, or a terrible desecration?

10. For further discussion: The diary entries in *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes* are fiction. However, the life of Hannah Mendes is based on the historical figure, Gracia Mendes, a Renaissance businesswoman and a converso. Compare the diary entries to the life of Gracia Mendes as outlined in such works as *Gracia Mendes and the House of Nasi*, by historian Cecil Roth and other books about Spanish-Jewish history.

Conversos (Spanish and Portuguese for "a convert", from Latin *conversus*, "converted, turned around") and its feminine form **conversa** referred to Jews or Muslims or the descendants of Jews or Muslims who converted to Catholicism in Spain and Portugal, particularly during the 14th and 15th centuries. Mass conversions took place under great governmental pressure.

Conversos were subject to suspicion and harassment from both the community they were leaving and that which they were joining. Both Christians and Jews called them *tornadizo* (renegade). Jaime I, Alfonso X and Juan I passed laws forbidding the use of this epithet. This was part of a larger pattern of royal protection, as laws were promulgated to protect their property, forbid attempts to reconvert them, and regulate the behavior of the *conversos* themselves, preventing their cohabitation or even dining with Jews, lest they convert back.

The conversos did not enjoy legal equality. Alfonso VII prohibited the "recently converted" from holding office in Toledo. They had both supporters and bitter opponents within the Christian secular and religious leadership. *Conversos* could be found in various roles within the Iberian kingdoms, from bishop to royal mistress, showing a degree of general acceptance, yet they became targets of occasional pogroms during times of extreme social tension (as during an epidemic and after an earthquake.) They were subject to the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions.